

Weird Tales

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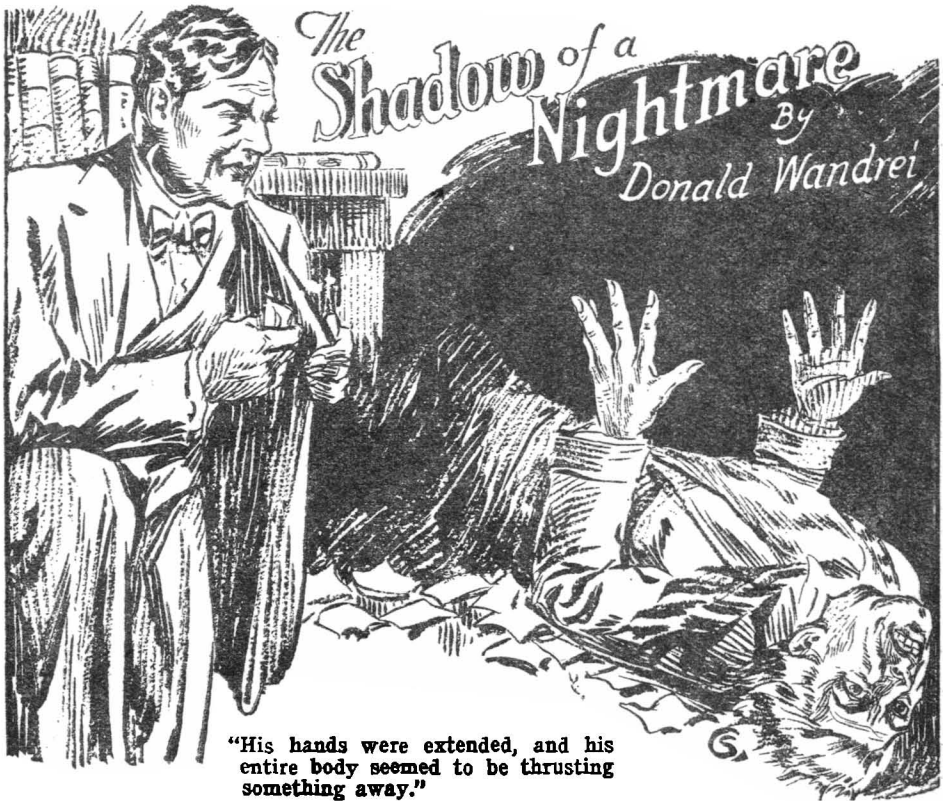
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“I HAVE never read,” remarked Arthur Marl, “a true horror story.”

We who were with him in a corner of the club-house looked at him in surprize.

“Why, you’ve been making a study of Gothic literature for twenty years or more. You surely must have read *some*,” a member replied.

“Of course.”

“Then why did you say you hadn’t?”

“I didn’t.”

We looked at him, puzzled.

“For heaven’s sake, will you kindly explain yourself?” some one demanded.

“The thing is obvious, or ought to be. I said I had read no *true* horror story, though I have read many which seemed so for a moment.”

“What’s the difference?”

“This: The best stories of the type called ‘Gothic’ may affect a person temporarily; some may even give him nightmares if he is of a nervous temperament, but this does not necessarily mean that they are true horror tales.”

“It depends on what you mean by a ‘horror’ story,” someone remarked.

“Exactly. And can you tell me what a tale of horror is?”

“One that makes your spine crawl——”

“One that, if read at night while alone, will make you jump for bed——”

“One that will make you afraid of the night——”

“One that you can’t recall except with a shiver——”

"One that you won't want to recall——"

Arthur quelled the babel. "You all are partly right."

"What's your own definition?" asked somebody.

He thought for a moment; then he replied:

"What I say will apply only to those who have more than a passing acquaintance with Gothic literature. One who reads but little and has never come across more than one or two specimens of the macabre will naturally have received a much deeper impression from those stories than would one who is familiar with the type. The more tales of terror you read, the more inured you become. There is always the thrill of the first few horror stories, of course, but indifference comes quickly. Life is so comprehensive that little can be new; but the unknown, the utterly unknown, is the essence of terror.

"I have made a study of this field for twenty years or so. My collection of such books and manuscripts, as you know, is one of the best—perhaps the only ambitious one—in existence. A taste for the gruesome, once acquired, is unappeasable, but although my library contains thousands of these volumes, there is not one among them which I consider a true Gothic romance.

"A tale of horror is one which begins on a low key of foreboding and rises steadily and rapidly like the howl of a wolf until words of awful imagery twist across the dead pages in a stream of terror; a tale that begins in shadow and passes into darkness until an utter blackness filled with Things surges about the reader; a tale that preys on the mind, that destroys all but one central part and wraps itself around that part on which to feed.

"As I said, there is no such story in all my collection. I have obtained many books famed as being horrible,

but they all lack something, or at best have only a temporary effect. *The Monk* in reality does not belong to the class; *Melmoth* is more properly an adventure novel; *The Vampire* is as good as its progeny *Dracula*, but vampires are becoming common; *Frankenstein* is famous mainly because it was one of the first Gothic romances; Benson is often too definite; Poe is the master, of course, though Lovecraft is now writing terrific tales.

"You see, if an author makes his story too definite, it descends to the ordinary or becomes either disgusting or ridiculous, depending on how far he goes. Thus, Wells' *The Cone* is disgusting, as are tales of cannibalism and torture. Physical pain is ephemeral; it comes to an end. The mind can not be greatly affected by finite or material things, because it is acquainted with them. It needs a tale of hints and whispers that it can develop unlimitedly."

We were silent for a moment, but some one broke out, "Do you expect ever to read such a story?"

"Perhaps," was his only reply.

2

I BELIEVE it was two days later that Arthur took me into his confidence. He did not mention the tale to anyone else, but he told me about it because I myself was quite fond of Gothic literature.

"There is now on its way to me a manuscript from an agent in India," he said. "It was purchased from a native who had stolen it from a collection of ancient writings somewhere in the north; exactly where, I don't know. My agent could make little of it, but the native claimed that it had passed into evil legend. I have found a reference to the manuscript in a Sanskrit fragment over three thousand years old. Even there it is described as being of unknown age.

"Think of it!" he half whispered to me. "It was written perhaps a hundred or more centuries ago! I believe, from the translation of the Sanskrit fragment, that it will be the key to the forgotten past. For, ages ago, the fragment states, there arose somewhere in the northern part of India, or beyond the Himalayas, a civilization of the highest type among a band of people completely isolated from the rest of their kind. But they all were madmen—maniacs! They were countless centuries ahead of their time, but they were insane! They lived in the days when the world was still young, and they had access to forces which have passed with the waning of the earth. And because they were mad, they had those forces more readily at their control."

His eyes were gleaming brighter: "They developed an advanced, but a mad and perverted civilization, with the aid of those evil forces. Their architecture was strange and fantastic; their art was a thing of shadows, the reflection of their madness and their servants; their literature was the key to all ancient mysteries, the portal to the entities which have remained hidden for epochs and are now remembered only as myths, legends, and fabled lore. They had at their call terrific implements of power and destruction in those Evil Ones; they kept that secret in their literature. But with the coming of a now unknown doom, the entire country was ravaged, the cities became heaps of dust, the inhabitants were wiped out, and all their work was obliterated, except one small group of books. And of that group the only manuscript extant is the one I shall receive, written by a madman whose every thought was inspired by the ravaging Things inseparably connected with the Country of the Mad, and giving somewhere in it the key to what the world has forgotten!"

I was inflamed, of course, by this

extraordinary narrative, and eager to know more. A torrent of questions burst from me, but Arthur had told me all he knew. He suggested that I come over, however, when the manuscript had arrived.

I did not see him in the meantime, but when he notified me a couple of weeks later that he had received the manuscript, I immediately hastened over.

Never before had I seen him so excited. His eyes shone and gleamed steadily. He was nervous, and not only were his old mannerisms intensified, but he had picked up a dozen new ones. His voice had an unusual tone, an unsteadiness.

"Come in. The manuscript's here."

I followed him inside and we walked to the rooms containing his library. A large table covered with books stood in the middle of one room. He motioned me toward it. All the volumes were ancient and musty; some were riddled with worm-holes, some had damp-stains and mold-spots, while others had faded or discolored leaves.

"Here it is," he said, pointing before him.

It was almost with awe that I looked at the manuscript. The leaves of it were fastened between old and worn covers of ivory that once had been inscribed with strange, gold symbols. The characters within, on parchment of great age, were totally unfamiliar to me. Many of those near the margins had faded or had been thumbed to illegibility, but in the centers they were black and distinct. The writing was clear and in a fine hand. Yet the manuscript aroused in me an immediate distaste. Something about those ancient leaves with their black, unknown characters repelled me in a singular manner.

"In what language is it written?"

"I'm not sure," he replied slowly. "I have been comparing it with the

oldest of the Indian tongues, but it doesn't agree with any of them. It resembles Sanskrit most closely, and seems to bear the relation to it that Anglo-Saxon does to Modern English."

"Whew! It must be one of the oldest works in existence! Have you begun to decipher it yet?"

"I am just commencing the task, which I may not finish for weeks. But what a find! I think I have my tale at last!"

3

I DID not see him again until two months later, for I was out of town. The manuscript was not forgotten, however; on several occasions it came into my thoughts and I wondered how Arthur was progressing, or if it lived up to his hopes. But I heard nothing from him during the period, and it had faded somewhat into the background of memory by the time I returned.

The evening after I got back, I decided to call on Arthur. I dropped in at the club on my way to his home, thinking he might possibly be there. He wasn't. But I met an old friend and we chatted for a few minutes. As I left him, to continue my way, he remarked, "Sorry you're leaving so quickly. Is it a pressing engagement?"

"Well, not exactly," I replied. "I'm going to see if Arthur's home."

I have never seen the face of a man change as rapidly as his. For a brief instant his features altered, and there came into his face an expression of aversion, almost of fear. I looked at him in surprise. He pursed his lips as if to answer my unspoken question, but said nothing. Instead, he motioned me toward a corner.

For another minute he was silent, after we had seated ourselves, before asking, "When did you last see Arthur?"

"About two months ago. Why?"

He ignored my question and said, half to himself, "And you have known him as long as I."

"Longer. But what are you driving at?"

Again he ignored my question. "You will keep this to yourself?"

"Of course," I answered. I was beginning to feel slightly alarmed as well as puzzled. "But what's the matter?"

He seemed to be arranging his thoughts, when, in a moment, he began speaking. His face was almost expressionless, and he talked in a low tone which did not go beyond me, though I could hear him distinctly.

"Perhaps you can explain this. I can't, though I have spent a week on it. And I'm beginning to wonder if it will be explained. Well, I saw him a week ago, Tuesday to be exact. I had gone out to his house for the evening and intended to pass several hours there. Arthur lives alone, you know, and we would not be interrupted but should have the evening to ourselves, since it was the servant's night off.

"I arrived about half-past 7, and Arthur himself admitted me. One of the first things he did was to show me some recent additions to his queer library. He had acquired some Latin works on demonology, among them a rather gruesome Sixteenth Century volume that contained several of Brueghel the Elder's nightmare-compositions, engraved, I think, by Cock. There was also a manuscript of great age which evidently fascinated him. He handled it with a mixture of like and dislike for some minutes while we were looking at his new volumes, and seemed half reluctant, half glad, to leave it.

"When we left the books, we went to his den, or whatever he calls the room where he keeps his curios. And it was there that I was first struck by something—unusual—about his appearance. I had not noticed any-

thing different before we looked at the manuscript and the books, but I did now. There was nothing *definitely* wrong, but his eyes—you have noticed them? their sunkenness and depth?—well, they were lit curiously in a—*frightened*—sort of way. And he was nervous; he had picked up a number of mannerisms, and was so restless that I thought he must be suffering from overwork, or in need of a change. At times he fell into an abstraction, or gazed steadily at some vacant spot as if he saw something. Once he jerked his head around unexpectedly as if he thought someone was behind him. And that *frightened* look never left his eyes.

“‘You ought to take a vacation,’ I remarked suddenly. ‘You’re wearing yourself out.’”

“‘I know it,’ he replied. ‘Perhaps I will soon. I’ve been spending all my time translating the manuscript, and it was quite a strain. But I finished last night, so perhaps I won’t need a rest.’”

He stopped, but almost immediately continued, as if anxious to complete his story.

‘It was after 10, I believe, when Arthur stood up suddenly with an apology and a remark about books that I didn’t quite catch and left the room. I amused myself glancing at some of the curios while I waited.

“Five minutes passed. I turned to the old guns on the wall and examined them. Ten minutes came, and I wondered at the delay. I looked at the curios another five minutes. Then I began to feel slightly puzzled. The room was silent, and my thoughts were coursing in strange channels. I began to listen in spite of myself, but no sound could be heard. Fancies began to intrude themselves into my mind and I became vaguely apprehensive. I could have sworn that the atmosphere of the room had changed. Then I felt oddly uncomfortable and restless. I began to imagine all kinds of things. I tried to forget them. I

tried to discount them as mere imagination. I thrust them away. They kept coming back. There was absolutely no ground for fear or doubt, but I was really alarmed. Then I got angry with myself and stood still. But the silence oppressed me and I walked about the room again. I could not imagine what was wrong with me. I pulled out my watch. Over twenty minutes had elapsed, and Arthur was still gone.

“‘I’m an ass,’ I cursed to myself, ‘but I can’t stand this any longer. He said something about books. I’ll glance in his library, where he must be.’”

“I left the room immediately and walked to the library, calling myself a fool as I walked. A light shone through the open door and I stepped in. I had guessed right. Arthur was standing near the middle of the room, with his back half toward me.

“‘I hope I’m not intruding,’ I said, ‘but I got restless and thought something might have happened to you.’”

“He did not reply. Then I noticed that there was something curious in his attitude; he was swaying, as if about to fall. I saw him pass his arm across his forehead and eyes as I sprang to his side. As I reached him, he removed it. I met the full stare of eyes darkly liquid and suffering with a black horror.

“‘For God’s sake!’ he whispered. ‘Brush them off!’”

“I looked at him blankly. His eyes were fastened on some point in the air between us. He knew I was near, but apparently did not see me. ‘Brush what off?’”

“‘Quick!’ he moaned, in a voice which had become husky and frantic. ‘I can’t do a thing! They won’t obey me!’”

“I stood motionless, too dumfounded for thought. His eyes had taken on an aspect of utter terror such as I have never believed possible in any human being.

“‘My God!’ he moaned in a low voice. He was silent for a moment. Then he caught his breath suddenly and gasped—and the gasp turned to a rising moan, the moan to one continuous terrible shriek. He clawed at his face. He whipped the air all around, taking short steps in every direction but stopping immediately as if he had hit something. His face was hellish and working convulsively—his hands now covered his head, now lashed about—and that fearful scream never ceased.”

He paused, and his voice became steadier. After a few seconds, he continued.

“I got a basin of water, carried it back in a trice, and hurled it in his face. Why I did, I don’t know, except that I had no physical strength compared with that then in him. But at the first shock of the cold water, he stood still, and his face changed. A puzzled look came into it; he abruptly became himself, and sank exhausted into a chair.

“‘Thanks,’ he said, with a faint, ghastly smile. ‘My nerves are worse than I thought. I believe I shall take your advice.’”

4

I COME now to the last stage of that strange affair. That it may explain all is possible; that it will, I am not so sure. Perhaps Arthur Marl was insane, with a latent malady that had always afflicted him, or a sudden attack. But I saw the manuscript, and perhaps. . . .

It was getting dark when I left the club, but I decided to go to Arthur’s residence at once, and hailed a cab. I thought over what I had heard, as I was carried toward his home, but I could make little of it. The one thing I was sure of was that the manuscript had something to do with the matter.

We drew up to his house, and I dismissed the cab. It was quite dark by now. A light was burning in the

house, but, although I pushed the bell-button, I could not hear it ring, and no one answered. Then I remembered that this was the servant’s night off. I decided to presume on our friendship as I had done many times before, and hence opened the door myself.

Since Arthur was usually in his library at this time, I wasted no more time but immediately went toward it. A dim light was burning there, but I could see no one. However, I turned the light on full before leaving, in order to make sure, and—on the floor lay Arthur Marl, long dead, his face set in a look of the most unutterable horror I have ever seen. His hands were extended, and his entire body seemed to be thrusting something away. Scattered near him were several small leaves of writing which I glanced at briefly and stuffed into my pocket.

It was not until an hour later that I got a chance to read them. I did what I could for Arthur, and made arrangements for proper treatment of the body. Once at my rooms, however, I hesitated no longer. I settled myself in a chair and spread out the leaves. They were mixed up, but even when I had arranged them they did not form a complete record, for the first pages, and some of the later, were missing.

And there, before the drowsy warmth of the fire, the room behind me darkened save for its dull glow, I read the leaves.

“. . . And so there was a Country of the Mad long ago. That first allusion, then, was true, and the author right.

“7. I have now translated the rest of the ancient volume, and part of the history of that strange land lies before me. Was there ever a myth wilder than the tale of the Country of the Mad? Think of it! More than ten thousand years ago, that band of mad-

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The Shadow of a Nightmare

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men was collected and carried to a secluded mountain valley, and the only entrance sealed behind them. Guards were placed around the valley, at first, but the years passed, the story became legendary, and the guards were withdrawn for wars and never returned. The legend itself faded in time, and the Country of the Mad far beyond the known ranges lay forgotten.

"But in all the years that the valley had been sealed, the band had survived and increased. At first they found it difficult to exist, for they were all insane and could not unite. But the valley was fertile, and they found it easy to live on the wild fruits and vegetables there, and the various small animals that were in it. They were people of all stages of insanity, and of several races. For a while they were antagonistic to each other, race to race and individual to individual. Their twisted minds could not work together; none could tell what the madness of another might lead him to do. Murder, fighting, plot and counterplot, outbursts that sent them raging up and down the valley were common at first. But years passed by, and the young grew up accustomed to each other's madness. The children were almost invariably insane from birth; normal ones were killed because they were not like the rest. The races themselves intermarried.

"And so, in time, their madness became equalized, their insanity a thing which affected all alike. The Country of the Mad flourished, a nightmare of nightmares. And it flourished, not because of the madmen, but because of what had entered.

"The volume tells no more. What entered, therefore, remains a mystery—but I can guess.

"12. Received a letter from Chelton saying he has acquired an ancient manuscript for me and is forwarding it. He says it is written in a dead Indian tongue. Hope it refers to the Country of the Mad.

"25. The manuscript has arrived, and I am beginning the translation. It is priceless! A chronicle from the valley itself, written by one of the band! It seems to be the key to some rite.

"29. John has left. I may never finish the translation. They are beyond my control already, wild from their enforced absence of nearly ten thousand years. God! I *can't* live without sleep. And I was fool enough to search for the most horrible tale. . . .

"Aug. 1. I have destroyed the manuscript and my translation. If only I had never seen the thing! For I know now what it is that comes to him who has opened the door that they discovered. It is three days since I have closed my eyes; I have not slept since the night. . . . And drugs won't keep me awake longer.

"11 p. m. These may be the last words I shall write. I can hardly keep my eyes open, though I—though I—ho-hum—though I—seem—though I seem to feel them—gathering—insane—that are insane—no shape save the shape of nightmare and horror and rottenness—shapes of corpses and staring skulls—shapes indescribable—shapes—shapes—I *can't* hold out any longer—I *must* sleep—I tell you, I *must*. What if they do come again? I tell you, I've *got* to sleep. Ahhhh—hhhhh—

"My God! They're coming—they're crawling up my legs—they're creeping up my face—my eyes—God save me!—and entering my brain!"

